

PRESS RELEASE

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IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
October 8, 2003

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CONYERS HAILS PASSAGE OF **“ADVANCING JUSTICE THROUGH DNA TECHNOLOGY ACT”**

Congressman John Conyers, Jr., Ranking Member of the House Judiciary Committee issued the following regarding the passage of H.R. 3214, “Advancing Justice Through DNA Technology Act of 2003” by the House Judiciary Committee:

“I want to thank Chairman Sensenbrenner, Representative Delahunt and Members on both sides of the aisle for their hard work in developing this bipartisan, bicameral compromise. HR 3214 takes the first of hopefully many steps towards improving the integrity of our criminal justice system.

First and foremost, the bill provides federal inmates with access to DNA testing, thereby enabling them to establish their innocence after being subjected to a wrongful conviction. As many of you know, over the past few years, more than 110 innocent Americans have already been exonerated thanks to post-conviction DNA testing. This provision will ensure that others wrongfully convicted will also have an equal chance at obtaining justice.

Second, the bill authorizes grants to be awarded to States with the express purpose of improving the quality of legal representation afforded indigent defendants in capital cases. Experts have indicated that many of the most egregious cases in which an innocent person was wrongfully convicted involved attorneys who were incompetent, ill-trained or simply ineffective. These grants will dramatically alter this situation by providing defendants with defense counsel that meet a minimum standard of competency.

Finally, the bill contains a provision - not often mentioned - but of extreme importance to those that have been subjected to a wrongful conviction. I’m speaking of the provision in the bill that increases the maximum amount of damages an individual may be awarded for being wrongfully imprisoned from \$5,000 to \$50,000 per year in non-capital cases and up to \$100,000 per year in capital cases.

Having pointed out the many virtues of the bill, I must admit this bill remains far from perfect. I would prefer the legislation to include an outright ban on the use of the federal death penalty. I also think the bill would have been considerably better if it addressed some of the many factors that contribute to the unacceptably high rate of wrongful convictions, including eyewitness error, perjury, false confessions and police torture.

I commend my colleagues on the Judiciary Committee for passing this very important legislation and I look forward to its ultimate passage on the House floor.”

##JUD-108-10/08/03##